

Far Away, a *Kokila* Sings... The *Ashtanayika* in the Poetry of Music

SHANTHA BENEGAL

The poetry of music is a meadow of unassuming flowers. If you pick a flower and put your nose to it there is often no discernible perfume. It takes a breeze to release the subtle fragrance. At first acquaintance, the poetry of music also seems trivial, unscented. Lyrics are, after all, assumed to be of secondary importance in music. Their authors have long been considered *vaggeyakar* [lyricists] not *kavi* [poets]. It is with surprise that I discovered there is more to this poetry than meets the “nose”.

The lyrics of *rag* capture the essence, or *ras*, of an image so that it can be described in song. The lyricist’s perspective, I find, is different from the poet’s. The poet calls attention to images and the words that make those images. The lyricist uses images with economy. Aural devices such as onomatopoeia, alliteration, double entendre, and elongated vowels abound in this kind of writing. The poetry of *rag* is minimalist. Lyrics are like cameos or haiku composed in rhyme and *rag*. They are stripped of syntax so that the words can be re-strung in many different ways by the singer, altering the meaning in subtle ways. Inevitably, these lyrics are subject to many and contradictory interpretations. For example, the Rag Basant *dhrupad* (No. 3) below, at first glance, seems to address Krishna, but on closer scrutiny evokes Radha instead.

The poems of the lyricists are only outlines, like the ascent-descent of a *rag*. The performer’s imagination fills them out, or to continue our initial metaphor, releases their fragrance. In translating these poems I have assumed the role of the performer. I have attempted to capture their *ras* as well as their literal meaning. This means that in some instances, I prefer to paraphrase rather than match word with word. I like to think of the *vaggeyakar* as the *doosree kokilaa* [answering cuckoo] in the Kedar *dhrupad* (No. 1) below. His or hers is the voice of the cuckoo singing far away in a glade, echoing the emotions of the singer, Radha, dancing in bliss.

The Literary Context

The classical music of North India is believed to have peaked under the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Akbar’s court saw the *nava ratna* [the nine jewels, including humorist Birbal, and singer Tansen] come together with poets such as Keshavdasa, to exchange ideas. Naturally, the poetry of music was influenced by the conventions and fashions that

ruled the literary world at that time. One finds in the poetry of music some of the mannerisms and genres of its literary cousin. There are ballads in praise of kings, narrative poems about Rama and Sita, devotional poetry about Shiva and Parvati. As in literature, dance, sculpture and painting, the poetry of music employs the nine *ras*. However, *sringar ras* [erotic love] is the overwhelming favourite. Many are poems written about the amorous adventures of Radha and Krishna, and are indebted to the *nayika bheda* [categories of heroines] scheme.

The *ashtanayika*

The *ashtanayika* [the eight varieties of heroines and their subtypes] have been recurrent favourites in art, literature, dance, and music since classical times. According to Vatsyayana (author of *Kama Sutra*), Jaideva (*Gita Govinda*) and their Braja Bhasha descendant Keshavadas (*Rasikapriya*), *nayika* [heroines] are categorized into types by age (e.g., Praudha, older and experienced; Mughdha, young and innocent), body type (Hastini, stocky; Padmini, slender and beautiful), character (Praglbha, bold) sexual prowess, and emotional attitude (Khandita, jealous; Abhisarika, aroused; Vipralabdha, disappointed). Permutations and combinations of these types have given rise to an endless number of character types. The poems below do not purport to be exhaustive illustrations of *nayika* types. They have been selected at random from my own song repertoire for their simple but effective use of *nayika* imagery.

It will be observed that the imagery is evocative of the female stance taken by the devotees of the Bhakti cult – a dualistic movement that swept through India from the 16th century onwards. The devotees' love for their lord is often equated with the love of Radha, the favoured *gopi* [milkmaid], and mistress of Krishna. In singing the songs, the performer may interpret them on a romantic level or a spiritual level, or move from one to the other.



Folio from Ragmala series, detail, c. 1750

The *samayana abhisarika*

This heroine dresses in a blue sari, decorates herself with ornaments, does not care if people watch her as she walks slowly to keep her tryst with her lover, a flower held in her hand. The *nayika* here happens to be Radha.

1) *Dhrupad in Rag Kedar, Shultal*

राधिका आज आनंद में डोरे ।

Radhikaa aaj aanand men dore

सांवरे चंद्र गोविंद के रसभरे ।

Saanware Chandra-Govind ke rasabhare

दूसरी कोकिला मधुर स्वर बोले ॥

Doosree kokilaa madhur swara bole

पहर तन नील पट दामिनी दमकत ।

Pahar tana neel pata daaminee damakat

हाथ लिये आरसी रूप को खोले ॥

Haath liye aarsee roop ko khole

Radhika dances in joy today

Filled with the essence of

Dark-skinned, moon-faced Govinda.

Far away, a cuckoo sings sweetly.

Clad in blue - Krishna's hue,

She shimmers like the lightning

That dances in the clouds.

The mirror in her hand,

Reflects the beauty of her lord.

My teacher, Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, explained this song with a classical image from literature: Radha embodies the earth, dancing in bliss to the rhythm of the universe – created by the magnetic magic of Krishna. The lightning dances in the clouds, and the cuckoo echoes the earth's happiness, as the earth with its lakes and rivers, holds mirrors to the blue sky, the colour of Krishna.

The *khandita nayika*

She is the heroine whose lover did not come to her at the appointed time, but arrives the next morning bearing signs on him of enjoyment with another woman. She is hurt, jealous, proud, sarcastic, but ultimately yielding.

2) *Chota Khayal in Rag Deshkar, Tintal*

हौ तो तोरे कारन जागी ।

Hau to tore kaarana jaagee

प्यारे बलमा आये हो , भई भोर

Pyare balmaa aaye ho, bhaee bhor

अंजन अधर पिया पलकन पे ।

Anjan adhar piya palakan pe

रैन गंवाई है, अति शोर ॥

Raina ganwaaee hai, ati shor

All night I stayed awake for you

You come now at daybreak

Her kaajal on your lips,

Her image in your eyes

It seems you spent the night

Carousing.

Your face declares it. Loudly.

Nava yowvan or mughda nayaki

Part girl, part woman, this *nayika* is bashful, beautiful, tender, and gullible, such as the unsuspecting Radha in the following:

3) *Dhrupad in Rag Basant, jalad Chautal*

फुलवा बिनत डार डार ।

Phulava binat daar daar

गोपियन के संग कुमार ।

Gopiyan ke sang Kumar

चंद्रबदन चमकत । बृषभानु को लली ॥

Chandrabadan chamakat. Brishbhaanu ko lalee

ऐसो चंचल कुमार । अपनो अंचरा सम्हार ।

Eso chanchal Kumar. Apno ancharaa samhaar

आयो ब्रज नंदलाल । छलन को लली ॥

Aayo Braj Nandlal. Chhalan ko lalee

Plucking flowers from branch to branch,

The luminous youth (Krishna) sports

With the milk-maids

Like the moon playing hide and seek.

O darling daughter of Brishbhaanu (Radhe)

Take care! Nanda's son

Has come in woman's disguise

To trick you.

Hold on to your sari's edge.

4) *Dhrupad in Rag Asawari, jalad Shultal*

कान्हा आन सुनाई बांसुरी कान्हा ।

Kaanhaa aan sunaee baansuree Kaanhaa

बृषभानु दुलारी अचानक निकस आई ब्रजबाला ॥

Brishbhaanu dulaaree achaanak nikas aae brijbaalaa

बतियाँ करत प्यारी छलबलसो चतुर नार ।

Batiyaan karat pyaaree chhalabalason chatur naar

मुकुट माला तोड डारी मोती चुनत मै तेहारी ।

Mukut maalaa tod daaree motee chunat mai te haaree

ललनके बीच घेर लाई ॥ कान्हा घेर लाई ॥

Lalanke beech gher laaee, Kaanhaa gher laaee

कान्हा आन सुनाई बांसुरी कान्हा ॥

Kaanhaa aan sunaee baansuree Kaanhaa

कान्हा आन सुनाई बांसुरी कान्हा ॥

Kaanhaa aan sunaee baansuree Kaanhaa

Kanha's flute is calling, calling.

He's here, he's here!

The daughter of Brishbhanu (Radha)

And the milkmaids of Braja

Are drawn to him, drawn to him

Speaking sweet words

One clever lady contrives to break

The string of pearls in Kanha's crown.*

"Alas! as I collect scattered pearls

I'm defeated, quite defeated.

Kanha's flute draws me nearer,

Draws me nearer, draws me nearer."

The poet has used the line “motee chunat mai te haaree” as a sexual double entendre. Pearls are a symbol of purity. A “parakiya” (married woman), Radha has lost her chastity to Krishna. Under the spell of his flute, she has accepted defeat. It is not only impossible to get back something that is lost but also unimportant – it holds no interest for her.

The words in the following may be addressed to a *nayika* (not Radha, it appears) by her lover or by her companion. I have preferred to treat the words as coming from an anxious lover.

5) *Bara Khayal* in Rag Bihagra, *Tilwara tal*

हे प्यारी पग हौले, हौले धरे ।

He pyaaree paga haule, haule dhare

Tread softly, dear one

Softly, very softly,

ऐसी पग ऊपर, पायल बाजे, हाँ री ।

Esee paga oopar. paayal baaje, haan ree

O tender, tempting one,

Come to me softly

नवेली नेक मेरे आवो । मान, प्यारी पग हौले ॥

Navelee nek mere aavo. Maan, pyaaree paga haule

Lest your anklets give us away.

They're waking – the people of Braja

जागे सब ब्रजके लोग सब जागे, हाँ री ।

Jaage sab Brajke log sab jaage, haan ree

Soon they'll all be awake!

हठीली, मत कर इतनो मान गो ।

Hatheelee, mat kar itano maan go

Don't let your pride

Keep me on tiptoes

मान, प्यारी पग हौले ॥

Maan, pyaaree paga haule

Come to me, sweet, tempting one

One soft step at a time



Eight heroines led by Champakalata, folio from a *Rasakapriya* of Keshavadas. Amber, c. 1700

Uttama nayika

She is the *nayika* whose lover is not an ordinary person, but the supreme Lord himself. She worships her lover even when he neglects her. She may be one of the *gopis*; she may be a Parvati, Radha, or even a Mirabai, crazed by a consuming love of Krishna.

6) *Dhrupad* in Rag Bageshri, *Chautal*

नंद को नंदन ॥

Nand ko Nandan

अटूट कंदन प्रेम मे तो

Atoot krindan prem me to

बंधन बांध रही हौ ॥

Bandhana baandh rahee hau

एक दिन ब्रजराज के मंदिर

Ek din Brijaraaj ke mandir

मोरी आली एक बार गई हौ ॥

Moree aalee ek baar gae hau

नंद को नंदन ॥

Nand ko Nandan

One day, my friend

I went to the house of Braja's Lord.

One visit was all it took.

Now forever my unceasing tears

Bind me to the happiness

of having found the joy and son of Nanda.

In the following poem, the *uttama nayika* is the Goddess Parvati who faithfully worships an image of her husband, for he is far away from her meditating in the Himalayas.

7) *Dhrupad* in Rag Malkauns, *Chautal*

पूजन चली महादेव । चंद्रवदनी मृग नयनी ।

Poojan chalee Mahaadev. Chandravadaneer mriga nayanee

हंस गामिनी पार्वती ॥

Hansa gaaminee Paarvatee

कर लिए अगर्थाल । पुष्पन के गूंथे हार ॥

Kar liye agarthaal. Pushpan ke goonthe haar

मुख दियरा जलाए । देवन देव महादेव ॥

Mukh deeyaraa jalaae. Devan dev Mahaadev

To worship the great god Mahadev

Moon-faced, doe-eyed

Parvati sets out,

Gliding like a swan on smooth water

In her hand a platter of incense

And a garland of flowers

Her face illuminates the lamp

That lights the great god Mahadev

8) *Dhrupad* in Rag Jaijaiwanti, *Chautal*

एक समय राधिका

Ek samay Raadhikaa

मुख न बनाए अंग ।

Mukh na banaae ang

चली संग श्याम भुके ॥

Chalee sang Shyaam jhuke

कर श्रंगार रूप बनो

Kar sringaar roop bano

तिहारे ही मुख को ।

Tihaare hee mukh ko

देखके स्वरूप को

Dekhake swaroop ko

चंद्रहु लजाए रहे ॥ एक समय राधिका ॥

Chandrahoo lajaae rahe. Ek samay Raadhikaa

One day Radhika set out to meet her beloved

Face and body unadorned innocent

And Shyam seeing her

Bowed down in humility.

“Your beauty flowers as I gaze upon you

Like the green earth

When the rain comes down.

Even the moon is put to shame, O Radhika.”

Yes even the moon was put to shame

One day when Radhika set out

The image of the green earth and rain, though not stated in the poem, was suggested by Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. The image of the rain cloud and the green earth are often used in Sanskrit literature as an innuendo for sexual fulfillment. See also Rag Kamod below.

Viraho-kantitha nayika

This *nayika* cannot keep her clandestine meeting with her lover due to social pressures. She is married. Her restricting anklets, perhaps, a symbol of her marital shackles, cannot be easily removed. On a *nirgun* [formless] level, they may be considered to be symbolic of worldly attachments that cannot be severed with ease. Compare with Rag Bihagra above. There, the noise of the heroine's anklets adds to the excitement of the lovers' tryst, whereas in this case they are just a nuisance.



Imperial Mughal 1625-1650

9) *Chota Khayal* in Rag Nat Bihag (or Chayanat), *Tintal*

भनभन भनभन पायल बाजे ।

Jhanjhan jhanjhan paayal baaje

जागे मोरी सास ननदिया ।

Jaage moree saas nanadiyaa

और जेठनिया, और दौरनिया हे मां ॥

Aur jethaniyaa aur dauraniyaa he maan

अगर सुने बगर सुने गो ।

Agar sune agar sune go

और सुन पायो सदारंगीले ।

Aur sun paayo Sadaarangeele

जागे मोरी सास ननदिया । और जेठनिया, और दौरनिया, हे मां ॥

Jaage moree saas nanadiyaa. Aur jethaniyaa aur dauraniyaa he maan

Jingle jangle, jingle jangle

What spoil-sports

These gossipy anklets!

Now husband's mother, aunts, sisters

Sisters-in-law – the whole house

Will guess about us.

Sadarang says: I hear you, dear one,

All the way here.

Abhisandhita

The *nayika* is pale and listless, has no interest in anything when she away from her lover, and wants to keep him with her all the time.

10) *Chota Khayal* in Rag Kamod, *Tintal*

कारे जाने न दूंगी ।

Kaare, jaane na doongee

एरी माई अपने बलम को नैननमे भर लगी

Eree maanee apane balam ko Nainaname jhar laagee

पलकन मूंद मूंद ॥ कारे जाने न दूंगी ॥

Palankan moond moond. Kaare, jaane na doongee

चमके बिजुरी मेघवा गरजे सदा रंगीले महम्मदसा

Chamake bijuree, meghawaa garaje Sadaarangeele Mahammadsaa

बरसे मेहा बूंद बूंद ॥ कारे जाने न दूंगी ।

Barse mehaa boond boond. Kaare, jaane na doongee

My dark one,

I won't let you go.

I've trapped you in my eyes forever

And pulled the shutters down, down.

Says Sadarang:

Lightning is flashing,

Thunder is crashing

The dark sky too is melting down

Drop by drop by drop.

Viyogini nayaki

Here, the a heart-broken *gopi* speaks to Krishna's friend and emissary, Uddhava, a *nirguni* philosopher who hopes to convert from dualism [Bhakti] to monism [Advaita]. Their minds cannot grasp his concept, and their simple faith finally converts Uddhava instead. Surdas, the most prominent Braja Bhasha poet, has written extensive poetry on this theme called *bhramar git* (the songs of the bumble bee, a metaphor for Uddho, a short name for Uddhava). Alam, the lyricist, has captured the essence of Uddho poetry in this gem.

11) Dhammar in Rag Desi, Dhammar tal

ऊधो तुम जाय हरि पास Oodho tum jaay Hari paas	Uddho, you go back to Hari and tell him: How can the month of Phagun ever be the same
उन बिन कैसे फागुन मास Un bina kaise phaagun maas	Without you? You have gone to Dwarika and left us
आपही जाइ द्वारिका छाड़, Aaphee jaai Dwaarikaa chhaai	Now where can we go Without you?
हम छांडो किन पास ॥ Ham chhaando kina paas	I search for you in Gokul, I look for you in Brindaban I look for you everywhere.
गोकुल दूँडी बिंदराबन दूँडी, Gokul dhoondhee, Bindraabana dhoondee	Now where can we go Without you?
दूँढ फिरी, सब बार ॥ Dhoondh phiree, sab baar	Says Aalam, reward us with your presence This is our only wish
बेगी दरस दीजो आलम को Begee daras deejo Aalam ko	Uddho, you go back to Hari and tell him How can the month of Phagun ever be the same
ये ही मनकी आस ॥ Ye hee manakee aas	Without you?

Phagun is the last month of the Hindu calendar, during which the spring colour festival of Holi was celebrated by Krishna and the milkmaids with revelry.

Abhisarika

The satiated *abhisarika nayika* (also a Padmini – a *nayika* well-versed in the art of lovemaking and teasing) who has kept her tryst with her lover is described here after a night of love and abandon.

12) *Dhrupad* in Rag Shuddh Kalyan, *Chautal*

हीरन जटित रतनन के आभूषण छूटी छूटी Heeran jatit ratanan ke aabhooshan chootee chootee	Having made love, diamond ornaments Strewn here and there
देखियत सुरतांत दसन पांति Dekhiyat surataanta dasan paanti	She smiles her pleasure Teeth sparkling like a row of pearls
दूजे रीभे परमाद बाजू सो कपोलन Dooje, reejhe paramaad baajoo so kapolan	Arm raised to cheek in shy passion Now she draws her sari
छुआवत री ये ही संकोचत ॥ Chuaawat ree ye hee sankochat	Modestly around herself Now she turns away, letting it fall
कबहु सकुची सारी ओर Kabahu sakuchee saaree aur	A sidelong glance in her smile concealed. Youthful breasts by torn blouse revealed
मुरि मुरि मुसकात हंसत । Muri muri musakaat hansat	Twin flowers crested by bumble bees. A master of her art,
आनंद जोबन कटाक्ष करि रिभाए प्राण प्यारे Aanand joban kataaksh kari rijhaae praan pyaare	She has the upper hand On her intoxicated lover.
गात कंचुकि तरकी सोहत बहुबीर कूजकी ॥ Gaat kanchuki tarkee sohat bahubeer koojakee	

13) Rag Khem, *madhyalay Tintal* by Ata Hussain

हट ना करो मोहे जाने दे पिहरवा Hata naa karo mohe jaane de piharwaa	Don't urge me to stay, beloved Why do you look at me so, my friend?
सुरजनवा मोरे सैया । Surajanwaa more saiyyaa	My friends will stare at me Now, let go of my arms, says Ata's beloved.
संगके सखा सब निरख रहे अता Sangke sakhaa saba nirakh rahe Ataa	
अब छांडो ना मोरी बैय्या ॥ Ab chhaando naa moree baiyyaa	

The *nayika* images have not lost their fascination for lyricists as demonstrated by the above song by the 20th century composer Ata Hussain, an exponent of the Agra *gharana*. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra wrote in *The Absent Traveller*, "Metaphors take longer than a few centuries to fade if they fade at all." Apparently images also remain fresh.

Vasakshaiyya or vipralabdha

The *nayika* who waits impatiently for her lover, keeps glancing at the door alternately in expectation and disappointment.

14) *Dhrupad in Rag Kaushi, Shultal*

सो भजी भजी आवेरी ।

Son bhajee, bhajee aaveree

मुरि मुरि भांकी भांकी फिर जात ॥

Muri, muri jhaankee jhaankee phir jaat

द्वारे ठारी लगी ।

Dwaare thaaree laagee

रहत है तन मन अकुलात ॥

Rahat hai tan man akulaat

In tearing hurry she rushes to the door,

Gazes out, straining to see.

Now she looks out, now she turns around,

Only to rush to the door, again

Body, mind melting with longing

Manini nayika

This *nayika* is in a sulking mood because Krishna has betrayed her with another woman. The poet uses a favorite literary device, that of a go-between who offers advice on Krishna's behalf. A clever use has been made of the many meanings of the words "maan," "go maan," and "gumaan," which can mean "O listen to me" or "pride," or "such as."

15) *Dhrupad in Rag Multani, Chautaal*

एरी तेरो कैसे निभे गो मान

Eree tero kaise nibhe go maan

कान्ह बिन, आयो है मदन मान ।

Kaanhaa bina aayo hai Madan maan

निपट निठुर सीखा मान ले मोरी

Nipat nithur seekhaa maan le moree

भौवे ना तान कमान ॥

Bhauwe naa taan kamaan

My girl, why do you sulk so,

As if Kanha were not here

When he has come to you

Like Madan, the god of love himself?

Harsh though my words may seem

Listen to my advice.

Don't put those piercing glances

To the bow of your eyebrows.

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Shantha Benegal is a publicist for the School of Music at the University of Washington, Seattle. She was trained to sing dhrupad in jugalbandi with Annie Penta by the late Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, beenkar, on periodic visits to Seattle from 1975 to 1987.